

FORD WINS LE MANS!

(yes, again)

HÔTEL DE FRANCE,
LA CHARTRE-SUR-LE-LOIR,
19 June 2016:

Sitting on the terrace in the warm evening sunshine, with a large glass of crisp, chilled Jasnières, Club member Maitland Cook reflected on the 24 hours of Le Mans which had finished earlier that day... and the unbelievable climax after 23 hours and 57 minutes.

Photo by Ford



On a wet, chilly afternoon precisely fifty years ago, Ford finally achieved their goal of winning the Le Mans 24 Hour race, finishing in the first three places with the Ford GT Mk2 7-litre cars, and ending a long run of Ferrari victories. This year they came back with the new Ford GT to battle for Le Mans glory again, and the beginning of the race was a reflection of those previous days, with heavy rain on a cold windy day. For the first time in its long history the race had to be started under the control of the safety car, so treacherous were the conditions.

However, there has been much to get excited about for this year's event: not only the return of Ford, but an impressive entry list including works cars from Porsche, Toyota, and Audi in the leading class, and all the leading players in the LMP2 class, including Oreca, Ligier, and Alpine. The GT class was headed by Ford's return, alongside Ferrari, Corvette, Porsche, and Aston Martin.

In the celebrity stakes Brad Pitt started the race, the ever unpopular French Prime Minister Michel Valls attended, and actors Jackie Chan and Patrick Long were also present. In the driver ranks Fabien Barthez, French football star from the 1998 World Cup, was making his Le Mans debut, as was Scottish World and Olympic cycling champion Sir Chris Hoy. Whilst Formula 1 is still getting bad press, and with viewing figures falling, the World Endurance Championship continues its renaissance. TV coverage throughout the 24 hours stimulates the sponsors and spectators alike. In the huge crowd there seemed to be even more British than in the past. The camp sites were a sea of union jacks, beer, and barbecues.

The Porsches had dominated practice, filling the front row of the grid, followed by the two Toyotas which looked very competitive and stronger than ever before; the two Audis disappointed on the third row, in fifth and sixth posi-

tions. Qualifying times at Le Mans, or in any 24-hour race, are largely irrelevant, but indicate potential performance. From the flag it was a terrible anti-climax, with the rain pouring down and the cars in a slow speed snake behind the safety car for the first seven laps. The cacophony of booing and catcalls from the crowd confirmed the view that the caution shown for the latter part of the safety car period was unnecessary.

Once a dry line began to appear they were off, lapping at just over 3'23" once it dried out, and pitting every 13 to 14 laps in the outright class. It was a titanic struggle with Toyota and Porsche looking strong and competitive, with, for the first time in many years, Audi looking just off the pace. However, in the early stages Porsche and Toyota duelled for the lead, with Audi behind; clearly it was going to be a titanic struggle again this year. The battle-honed experience of both Porsche and Audi has long been noted; would Toyota be able to sustain that strength over 24 Hours was the question.

For the first seven hours the lead changed constantly between Porsche and Toyota with Audi leading for one lap only because of pit stops; just after 11pm the leading Porsche pitted with overheating which cost it nearly 90 minutes in the pits, and dropped it 39 laps behind the leaders. All through the night and in to Sunday morning the pressure remained on the leading two Toyotas and single surviving Porsche; at 10.14am the Porsche took the lead but Toyota kept fighting back, and gradually opened a gap to 40 seconds... By 13.30, with an hour and a half to the finish, it looked possibly a Japanese victory if no further dramas occurred. All Sunday morning they were still lapping at the same speed in approximately 3'23", as throughout the race. It was brutal in execution. As the race moved to its end the gap remained constant at approximately 30 seconds, and as the clock passed 3.57pm and the leader, the Toyota, came through the Ford chicane, on the

radio the driver was heard to cry "No power....no power" and then he slowed to a standstill! In a flash the Porsche was past to do what matters most, to lead on the final lap and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat! For Toyota it was the cruellest, most tragic end to a race they had seemed to be destined to win. Le Mans can be the most magnificent and the cruellest arena of all.

The much heralded GT class was just as closely fought. The Ford GT Team of Chip Ganassi, a giant of US racing, fought a race long duel with the Ferrari teams, slowly building a small lead, although with one hour to go they were still only 30 seconds ahead of the second placed car, with the other team cars third and fourth. Sadly for the huge British contingent Aston Martin were effectively outclassed, and finished fifth and sixth in class, and seventh in the gentlemen racer section; throughout the week they never looked to have class-winning potential. For Ford it was a triumphant return, the efficient organisation of Ganassi being in stark contrast to the early years of the Ford GT40 programme fifty years earlier where chaos reigned and marketing men abounded.

For Audi, still trying for a fifteenth victory, it was a disappointment, but for Porsche came more glory and now eighteen victories. So, the most hard-fought 24 hours came to its end, with a triumph against the odds for Porsche, but all the sympathy for Toyota even from the Porsche management and drivers, who were very graceful in their comments and words of sympathy. Everyone here sighed in relief as the tension finally stopped... definitely time for another glass before dinner.

I cannot wait to come back again in 2017; it will be 55 years involvement then, the last few years being infinitely more exciting than the first! Modern endurance racing is really something now... especially the theatrical drama of this afternoon.